

RECLAIMED

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing

Interdisciplinary Centre for Culture and Creativity University of Saskatchewan

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ABSTRACT

Reclaimed is a medical thriller with science fiction tendencies. The narrative follows Grace, a gardener for a wealthy mayor. Grace is a Reclaimed Human mutated by the vaccine for a population-crushing pandemic. She lives a 'healthy' life, reliant on medications to keep her from succumbing to the leftover ailments of her past mutation. Her work with the wealthy family provides her with free medication that Elencos, the genetics company, manufactures. Out of fear of illness, Elencos has become the central authority in society. Though Grace starts to doubt the genetics company when instances of vandalism are downplayed, it is not until a friend is arrested for such occurrences that she decides to leave her home in hopes of helping her friend. She quickly aligns with the rebel group Vega, and discovers the depths of the tyrannical genetics company's abuse of power. Medical authority has created a rigid status quo and Grace enters into a quest for emancipation, not just for herself, but for all Reclaimed Humans, from this oppressive structure.

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Reclaimed grew out of a desire to write a speculative fiction novel in which a strong female protagonist helps overcome a rigid and abusive status quo. My novel explores both sociological perspectives on illness as well as the power relations between citizens and the medical authority. Within the medical thriller arena, and with speculative fiction tendencies, my novel asks: If the creators of medical knowledge and technology were the ruling class and ultimate authority, how could an abuse of power be handled by members of the society?

Speculative fiction affords a writer unique imaginative opportunities. Anthony Easthope contends that “[t]he science fiction effect of defamiliarising pragmatic knowledge arises from the juxtaposition of an objectively conceived future world with a subject – the writer or reader – bearing their own knowledge in the present” (55). Essentially, because speculative fiction sets as its landscape a world different from our own, not limited by any particular orthodoxy, it often poses alternative possibilities that deal with politics and conflict either directly or indirectly (Davies 5).

Speculative fiction literature that informs my work includes *The Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) by Suzanne Collins, *The Dust Land* series (2011-2014) by Moira Young, and the *Uglies* series (2005-2007) by Scott Westerfeld. All three feature strong female leads confronting corrupt power structures. These heroines follow similar journeys of discovery and enlightenment; some more reluctantly than others. These works are action driven without sacrificing the reader’s connection with the characters, something I hope to emulate. Though these series are captivating, they also contain examples of plots I want to avoid: the love triangle between a heroine and two men, as well as the heroine hating the love interest at first before succumbing to his charm. I knew early on in my process these tropes would not fit my protagonist Grace or the story.

Other speculation fiction influences are the works of Margaret Atwood, in particular *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and *The Year of the Flood* (2009). Atwood subverts the typical love triangle in *Oryx and Crake* by enhancing Oryx’s agency in the narrative. In *The Year of The Flood*, Toby, though established as a victim, uses her pragmatic smarts for self-preservation. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Offred uses her observant wit as an internal resistance to the oppressive regime, as she is not outwardly brave or heroic in a classic sense.

Women in speculative fiction are often relegated to sexualized objects, or if they are to be of real use, adopt stereotypical masculine qualities of violence to help fight. Maureen Barr, in *Alien to Femininity: Speculative Fiction and Feminist Theory*, explains that female speculative fiction writers often exaggerate female stereotypes for the purpose of critiquing them (Barr xvii). In reading Barr’s work and authors such as Margaret Atwood, it is clear that speculative fiction can be a liberating space for women’s journeys as it allows a freeing landscape to explore women’s changing roles and “make the patriarchal structures that constrain women obvious and more perceptible” (Barr xx).

As indicated earlier, my work is also situated within the medical thriller genre. A thriller is defined as action oriented, which my novel certainly is, and a medical thriller is a story in which medical technology is at the crux of that action. As medical discourses changed, so did the representation of illness and disease in literature. Crisis caused from pandemics and mass disease outbreaks have been chronicled across centuries in different ways from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of The Plague Year* (1722) to Robin Cook’s *Outbreak* (1987), the later author a staple of

the medical thriller genre of the late 20th century. Even one of the earliest instances of science fiction, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), has a medical thriller aspect as it grapples with humans becoming godlike with medical experiments.

Medical thrillers that influence my work are the aforementioned *Outbreak* (1987) by Robin Cook, which follows an investigation into an Ebola virus outbreak. Also, the Patricia Cornwell series of twenty four novels (1990-2016) that follow Dr. Kay Scarpatta, a forensic medical examiner, as she uses her medical knowledge to solve crimes. Both of these works have a "who done it?" mystery that drives the narratives. My protagonist differs from the ones in these works as she is outside the medical profession. I wanted a more naive narrator as my novel's themes revolve around the bodily autonomy of people outside the medical authority.

Reclaimed bends and works outside of realism in similar ways to *World War Z* (2006) by Max Brooks and *I am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson. These novels employ medical technology and disease as action-driving implements, but, like mine, also include elements of speculative fiction in the form of mutated humans. However, these mutated beings do not derive from the supernatural, but rather from a logical (for the established world) scientific medical extrapolation, further solidifying the books as both medical thrillers and speculative fiction.

The final area of literary influence is the work of Joseph Campbell on the hero's journey combined with feminist critiques and reimaginings of that journey. Though Joseph Campbell's work has been critiqued heavily and considered outdated by contemporary scholars, it nevertheless provided a starting point to mobilize plot points in the narrative. Campbell's model posits the hero's initiation into an unknown dangerous realm that he must navigate and recover what was lost to society (Campbell 132). In contrast, Feminist scholars Maureen Murdock and Helen Beesley focus more heavily on how the quest or journey can provide healing for female protagonists. After achieving the goal of the patriarchal quest, women may experience a period of despair or emptiness that can only be overcome through healing relationships with women (Murdock 3).

Reclaimed can also be contextualized in relation to sociological perspective on health and disability theories. Despite some disillusionment with scientific medicine in the 21st century, "the mythology of the beneficent, god-like physician remains dominant" (Lupton 1). Lupton specifies that there is a paradox between the benevolent physician mythology and the critiques of medical professionals abusing their power and controlling, even oppressing, their patients. In most western societies access to health care is seen as a social good and an inalienable right which is why an abuse of power in the medical community is seen as a moral affront to society. The idea of medical knowledge as objective and politically neutral is continuously challenged, and rightfully so (Lupton 1-6). Historically, medicine has contributed to the marginalization of people (Lupton 173).

The social constructionism theory of health that began to take hold in the eighties remains a dominant approach. This theory maintains that medical knowledge is "a series of relative constructions which are dependent upon the socio-historical setting in which they occur and are constantly renegotiated" (Lupton 12). The social constructionism theory also posits the body is not a given reality, but rather "the product of certain kinds of knowledge and discourses which are subject to change" (Lupton 23). Within the constructionist theory, feminist scholars critiqued the 'biology as destiny' ideology, and drew attention to the ways in which medical knowledge was used by privileged groups to assert power over others (Lupton 13). Scientific medicine is an important and powerful source of knowledge that shapes the reality of one's body and how others view sick bodies.

The post-structuralism perspective of health includes the important theory that society's view of sick or unhealthy bodies is primarily based on outward appearance. This has resulted in the disabled body being a source of great anxiety: "A body that does not function 'normally' or appear 'normal', that is confined to a wheelchair or bed, is both visually and conceptually out of place" (Lupton 42). In *Reclaimed*, the corrupt pharmaceutical company Elencos manufactures an outward identifier for the illness so sick bodies are easily isolated and objectified. This stratification of society helps maintain Elencos' supremacy in the power structure. Elencos sees people only as objects or specimens. An oppressive position to take, as discussed by Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko in *Rethinking Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reader*.

Disability has often been explored by creative writers. The seminal text, *The Disability Studies Reader*, follows this pattern by including creative writing. The disabled or sick body is often used metaphorically in literature because storytelling begins with the anomalous, and nothing is more viscerally anomalous than what is considered an abnormality of the body (Mitchell 54). However, this can perpetuate the idea of people with disabilities as objects.

The illness in my novel aims to "take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions" (Mitchell 48) and create a shared social identity. Tobin Sieders asserts that a social constructionist perspective "makes it possible to see disability as the effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advancements in social justice rather than medicine" (Davis 173). Seiders observation resonates with David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder who discuss disability as a metaphor for social collapse in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and Dependencies of Discourse* (47).

My novel's protagonist, Grace, lives a shared social identity as a sick body, or Reclaimed Human. Her only source for determining the reality for her body is the medical authority. Elencos, the all-powerful genetics company, has created a system in which fear of a sick body and perpetual sick bodies has allowed the company complete control of society. Grace's self-perception shifts as she learns of the way truth has been presented by Elencos, how they are controlling bodies. Grace's ability to push back against corrupt power structure is enhanced by her alliance with other female characters such as Driya, and Halda. Within the framework of these social dynamics, my characters question the monopoly of power the genetics company has over society. As they learn more about their own illness they come into direct conflict with the rigid status quo, experience radical doubt, and come to re-evaluate what is 'truth.'

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